

Book review: Understanding men's bodies in visual culture

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Postprint / Postprint
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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Sørensen, N. U. (2005). Book review: Understanding men's bodies in visual culture. [Review of the book *Understanding men's bodies in visual culture*, by J. Still]. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12(1), 105-106.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506805048858>

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Book Reviews

UNDERSTANDING MEN'S BODIES IN VISUAL CULTURE

Judith Still, ed.

Men's Bodies, special issue of *Paragraph* 26, Nos 1 and 2 (March–July 2003)

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003, 290 pp., ISBN 0-7486-1728-0

For Women is the UK's only sexually explicit magazine for an exclusively female readership. In a chapter titled 'Fellas in Fully Frontal Frolics: Naked Men in *For Women Magazine*', Clarissa Smith not only analyses the magazine's nude images and their organization, she also reflects on the conditions under which male nudes can become erotic objects for women. As part of these reflections she presents a lengthy quotation by Julie, one of the magazine's many thousand female readers. Julie claims that while looking at the images of naked men in *For Women*, her fantasies 'concentrate on the penis, how I make it erect, touching it, stroking it, sucking it' (p. 135).

Smith's chapter fills a void in a new anthology edited by Judith Still called *Men's Bodies*, as it deals thoroughly with the consumer perspective in its analysis of the representation of men's bodies in visual culture – the overall theme of the book.

Men's Bodies contains 21 chapters by scholars from literature, sociology and art history, which deal with various aspects of this theme. They are divided into two sections. One section focuses on the male body posed, or captured, in a fixed and immobile representation. Another section deals with the representation of men in motion, men on the screen. On the way through the two sections, the reader is presented with a number of acute and original chapters – including an analysis of a work by the Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura, humour in the photography of George Dureau, the language of bodybuilding, and many more. Each chapter explores an aspect of the increased presence of images of men's bodies in both high art and mass culture – most from the viewpoint of the artist or the artwork, whereas only very few delve into the consumer perspective. Which is a bit peculiar.

Still's introduction presents a number of important problems that arise from dealing with so interdisciplinary an issue as *Men's Bodies*, which cuts across gender studies, sociology, literature, art history and other disciplines. She claims that the question of representation involves three interrelated dimensions, each with its own theories and vocabularies. The first dimension is the producer of the representation, or as Still puts it, 'the conditions of production, the producing intertext, or the artist' (p. 2). The second dimension is the material image itself, 'that which has been produced and placed in a particular location' (p. 2). And the third dimension is 'the consumer, the spectator, the gaze' (p. 2). And apparently it is in the interplay between these three dimensions that the representations acquire

meaning, so analyses which omit one dimension also miss out valuable knowledge of representations. Or, as Still writes, 'if the image can only be read via consumption we must also ask who looks at (which) pictures of men?' (p. 3). In addition, if the reading is not pre-given by the pictures but constructed in a relationship with the reader, it might also be relevant to ask *what* he or she actually sees when looking at these pictures?

Some of the chapters in *Men's Bodies* do reflect on the first question. For example Paul Jobling's chapter on 'Spectatorship in Men's Underwear Advertising in the 20th Century' and Edward Lucie Smith's 'Kitch and Classicism: The Male Nude in the Twentieth Century'. But, with the exception of Smith and Gays Snatch, unfortunately most don't delve considerably into the second. In his chapter 'Tom's Men: The Masculinization of Homosexuality and the Homosexualization of Masculinity at the end of the Twentieth Century', Snatch analyses the impact of the drawings of the Finnish artist Tom of Finland, whose drawings of idealized hypermasculine men have circulated for decades in gay communities in the US and Europe and, apparently, have had a considerable impact on self-understanding among men in these communities. 'It wasn't until I saw Tom of Finland's work that I realized it was possible to be gay and positive' (p. 78), one is quoted as saying.

But mostly the consumer perspective is marginalized in the chapters, that is if one leaves out of account that the authors of course are spectators too, who in many instances deliberately and interestingly reflect upon their positions as such. Still, the reader is not told how the meaning constructed through their 'parodic' (p. 54) or 'economistic' (p. 263) readings of specific pieces of art relates to meaning constructed by other groups of consumers' readings of similar or related cultural products. This might not seem highly relevant from a purely art historical point of view, but *Men's Bodies* is not a purely art historical topic. As Still outlines in her introduction, it is an interdisciplinary field affiliated with questions of power and gender that also exist outside the realm of art. Nevertheless, in many of the chapters this outside seems to disappear or at least tends to be described in such a generalized manner that extraordinary and enlightening statements – like the one made by Julie and quoted at the beginning of this review – are left out.

This is a pity. Not only because the lack of contextualization in some cases leaves the reader with an insufficient understanding of the relevance or impact of a seemingly clever and in some cases original reading of a specific cultural product. Also because Julie's statement based on everyday experiences of consuming erotic images of nude men helps to deconstruct some very powerful notions of the relationship between female viewers and male nudes, namely that 'women's emotional and psychological make-up prevent them from sexualising the male', and that 'the male body cannot be rendered properly erotic' (p. 134). As these notions relate to even more powerful notions of the nature of men and women, Julie's deconstructive endeavours illustrate that groundbreaking and transgressive gender practices are everyday business for many people. Such groundbreaking and transgressive academic work on gender issues could be facilitated by sharpening our look at these deconstructive everyday practices.

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